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## The Practice of Attention

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# PARABOLA

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## The Practice of Attention

*Philip Novak*

PRACTICES THAT strengthen the capacity for concentration or attention play a role in most great religious traditions. The importance of developing attention is most readily seen in the great traditions that arose in India, namely Hinduism and Buddhism. From the Upanisadic seers down to the present day, there is in India an unbroken tradition of man's attempt to yoke his self (body and mind) to ultimate reality. Yoga takes many forms, but its essential psychological form is the practice of one-pointed attention or concentration (*citta-ekāgratā*). Whether by fixing the attention on a mantra or on the flow of the breath or on some other object, the attempt to quiet the automatized activities of the mind through concentrated attention is the first step and continuing theme of Hindu psychospiritual yoga.

It could hardly be otherwise for the traditions that stemmed from Gautama Buddha. The *samatha* and *vipassanā* forms of meditation in the Theravāda tradition require as their root and anchor an ever increasing

ability to attend, to hold one's attention fast without relinquishing it to the various psychological forces that tend to scatter it. *Samatha* is the cultivation of one-pointed attention and is the common starting point for all major types of Buddhist meditation. *Vipassanā* meditation consists in the deployment of the concentrated attention developed in *samatha* from point to point within the organism, with the intent of understanding certain Buddhist doctrines at subtle experiential levels. Though the attention sought in *vipassanā* meditation is not one-pointed in the sense of being fixed on a single object, it remains a highly concentrated and directed form of attention, the very antithesis of dispersed mental wandering. Likewise, the Tibetan practice of visualization, which is attempted only after preparatory training in *samatha*, is a way of developing the mind's ability to remain steadfastly attentive by requiring it to construct elaborate sacred images upon the screen of consciousness. The two practices central to the Zen tradition, *kōan* and *zazen*, have as their

common denominator the practice of sustained, vigilant attention. Moreover, the major contemplative schools of Buddhism stress the virtue of mindfulness, the quality of being present, aware, and, in a word, attentive.

Arthur Waley tells us in *The Way and Its Power* (New York: Random House, 1958) that by the fourth century B.C. the Taoists had already developed methods of meditation and trance induction which were probably only indirectly influenced by Indian methods. They were called *tso-wang* and *tso-ch'an* and were fundamentally a training of concentration by the fixation of attention on the breath. Buddhism would likely have had a far more difficult time developing in China had it not been for such indigenous Chinese parallelisms.

When we turn to the three great Western monotheisms, the phenomenon of attention is not as starkly visible. Nevertheless it is there. Broadly speaking, spiritual disciplines in the monotheisms are not as fully developed as those of their cousins in the East. Often forced underground by hostile theological or theopolitical currents, many spiritual practices of the monotheisms appear to have succumbed to a process leading from esotericism, to obscurity and corruption, and eventually to forgetfulness. Still, these monotheisms contain profound mystical dimensions, and it is there we must look for the practice of attention.

The actual practices and methods of Jewish mystical prayer are difficult to determine, but references to method can be found intermittently in the ancient Talmudic texts, quite frequently in the works of Abraham Abulafia and some of his contemporaries, in the Safed Kabbalists of the sixteenth century, in the works of Isaac Luria, and in the Hasidic texts. The key terms are *hitbodedut* (meditation), *hitboded* (to

meditate), and *kavanah* (concentration, attention, and intention). The first two come from a root meaning "to be secluded." They often point beyond mere physical seclusion, however, to the seclusion beyond the discursive activity of the mind attained through concentration. *Kavanah* likewise refers to a concentrative or attentive form of prayer capable of inducing an altered, "higher" state of consciousness. For the Jewish mystical tradition as a whole, *mantram*-like repetitions of sacred liturgical words seem to be the central vehicles for the training of attention, but references to concentration upon mental images, letter designs, and color and light visualizations can also be found in the texts. Concentrative exercises are also linked with bodily movements and the movement of the breath. Some of the exercises prescribed by the thirteenth-century Abulafia involve long, complex series of instructions and would seem to require massive attentive capability to perform without distraction. In this they seem akin to the Tibetan Buddhist practice of elaborate visualization.

In the Christian world we find, in Eastern Orthodoxy, the prayer of the heart, or Jesus prayer, a Christian *mantram* which the contemplative uses to recollect the self, to unify attention and thereby to open the heart to the Divine Presence. The bulk of contemplative texts in the Roman Catholic tradition, like those of the Judaic tradition, are concerned with theory and doctrine rather than specifics of method. In the early Middle Ages, one can find references to contemplation as a seeking for God in stillness, repose, and tranquillity, but the specificity ends here. The late Middle Ages witnessed among contemplatives the growth of a prayer form called *lectio divina*, or meditative reading of the

scriptures. Cistercian monk Thomas Keating describes *lectio divina* as the cultivation of a "capacity to listen at ever deepening levels of inward attention."<sup>1</sup>

Practical mysticism comes more fully into bloom with the arrival of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross in the sixteenth century. John's way was the way of inner silence, of non-discursive prayer, of states of mind brought about by what he called "peaceful loving attention unto God." Lately an attempt has been made to popularize this kind of contemplative attention in the "centering prayer," again a *mantram*-like technique for the focusing of attention and the quieting of the mind similar to the Jesus prayer of Eastern Orthodoxy.

In the world of Islam we have the contemplative practices of both silent and vocal *dhikr*, again a *mantram*-like repetition, usually of the names of Allah, aimed at harnessing the will and its power of attention. A more generic term for the kind of meditative attention achieved in *dhikr* is *moraqebah*, described as "a concentration of one's attention upon God," as the "presence of heart with God," "the involvement of the [human] spirit (*ruh*) in God's breath," and the "concentrating of one's whole being upon God."<sup>2</sup> *Moraqebah*, the Sufis say, is not only a human activity but a divine one as well: it is because God is constantly attentive to us that we should be attentive to him.

Two men who have drawn on the traditions listed above and whose eclectic writings have had a significant impact among those interested in self-transformation are G.I. Gurdjieff and J. Krishnamurti. Crucial to the Gurdjieff work is the exercise of "self-remembering," fundamentally an attempt to develop sustained, undistracted, observational attention both

outwardly toward experience and simultaneously, inwardly toward the experiencer. This particular aspect of Gurdjieff's work is similar to the "bare attention" exercises of Buddhist *vipassana* meditation. Krishnamurti teaches that the practice fundamental to psychological transformation is "choiceless awareness." It is, again, the cultivation of sustained, observational, nonreactive attention to inner and outer experience. Looked at in isolation from the rest of Krishnamurti's teaching, this gesture of attention is not significantly different from either that of the Gurdjieff work or Buddhist "bare attention."

ATTENTION IS, of course, a concept that occurs outside the domain of religious praxis as well. It is part of the vocabulary of everyday mental functioning, and even there it seems to be overworked, a single, blunt term for a wide variety of mental states. The temptation to think of it as one thing should be resisted. It is better to think of it as a spectrum that reaches from the virtual absence of attention, as in sheer daydreaming and mechanically determined mental flux, to acutely active alertness. Though contemplative practices themselves vary widely, the quality of attention that they require and at which they aim resides at the upper end of the spectrum. The varieties of contemplative attention, in other words, resemble each other more than any one of them resembles that uneven and intermittent phenomenon of ordinary mental functioning we usually call attention. Some further notion of the relative difference between ordinary kinds of attention and the kinds of attention at which contemplative practices aim must be developed if we are to avoid confusion later on.

Ordinary attention may be de-

scribed as discursive, intermittent, and passive. It moves incessantly from object to object, its intensity "flickers," often succumbing to mental wandering, and it is reactive, or "passive," in relation to some sequence of external objects or to the autonomous stream of consciousness. Let us take, for example, the act in which the reader is currently engaged. You are following this exposition closely, attempting to understand it. Surely this is attention rather than inattention. The contemplative would agree. But he would suggest that this attention is discursive, and largely passive. In this particular case, my words are doing the discursing for your attention, leading it from place to place. Moreover, it is highly likely that, while reading, your attention will have wandered a surprising number of times, pulled down one associational path or another by autonomous psychic fluctuations. Even if you now turned away from this article and turned inward to work out a chain of reasoning, it is likely that you would do so in a state of predominantly passive attention, for such creative activity largely involves a sorting out of what the automatic activity of the psyche presents.

In ordinary mentation, attention is not a quality of mind that we bring to experience, but something that occurs, rather haphazardly, as our organism becomes momentarily more interested in some inner or outer sequence of phenomena. Ordinary attention comes and goes without our consent; it is not something we *do*, but something that *happens* to us. For most of us most of the time, "attention" is stimulated, conditioned, and led by mobilizations of energy along the habit-pathways within our organism so that when it confronts its object it is always faced, as it were, by a *fait accompli*.

The attention at which con-

templative exercises aim, then, may be distinguished not only from sheer inattention but from ordinary discursive attention as well. It is, instead, sustained, non-discursive, active attention which is, in fact, quite extraordinary. For there are many of us who in all our uncountable billions of mental moments and in all their variety, have never known a moment of truly active attention. Such a moment curtails the autonomous activities of ordinary psychological activity. If the reader doubts this, he may perform a simple experiment. Take up a "speak-I-am-listening" attitude of acute attention toward the screen of consciousness, standing close guard, as it were, at the place where the contents of consciousness are born. For as long as one is able to hold this posture of intense active attention, the inner dialogue and the flow of images will be stopped. As Hubert Benoit proposes:

Our attention, when it functions in the active mode, is pure attention without manifested object. My mobilized energy is not perceptible in itself, but only in the effects of its disintegration, the images. But this disintegration occurs only when my attention operates in the passive mode; active attention forestalls this disintegration.<sup>3</sup>

Anyone who has ever attempted active attention as we have just described it finds, however, that it is difficult to maintain for any extended duration. The ubiquitous admonition in contemplative texts to somehow go beyond images, ideas, and all discursive thought involves one in the seemingly self-defeating task of trying to stop the mind with the mind. And so we find under the guidance of a teacher that this admonition against discursive thought is but a cavalry charge subsequently balanced by a far more subtle strategy, a second movement as it were.

Given the fact that the deep-seated habit patterns of the psyche will repeatedly overpower an inchoate con-

centrative ability and assuming that the practitioner will repeatedly attempt to establish active, concentrative attention, his constant companions in all of this are impartiality, equanimity, and nonreactive acceptance. When concentrated attention falters, one is to be a non-reactive witness to what has arisen. Whatever emerges in the mind is observed and allowed to pass without being elaborated upon or reacted to. Images, thoughts, and feelings arise because of the automatism of deeply embedded psychological structures, but their lure is not taken. They are not allowed to steal attention and send it floundering down a stream of associations. One establishes and re-establishes concentrated attention, but when it is interrupted one learns to disidentify with the contents of consciousness, to maintain a choiceless, nonreactive awareness, and to quiet the ego with its preferences.

Should this description appear distinctly Asian and raise doubts regarding its relevance to contemplative prayer practices in the monotheisms, consider, by way of balance, this passage from *Your Word is Fire*, a work on Hasidic prayer:

Any teaching that places such great emphasis on total concentration in prayer must . . . deal with the question of distraction. What is a person to do when alien thoughts enter his mind and lead him away from prayer? . . . The Baal Shem Tov . . . spoke against the attempts of his contemporaries to . . . do battle with distracting thoughts. . . . He taught that each distraction may become a ladder by which one may ascend to a new level of devotion. . . . God [is] present in that moment of distraction! And only he who truly knows that God is present in *all* things, including those thoughts he seeks to flee, can be a leader of prayer.<sup>4</sup>

Though some scholars have drawn a mutually exclusive distinction between "concentrative" and "receptive" forms of attentional practice, the

foregoing suggests that this distinction must not be pressed too far.

IN ANY CASE, this scholarly quibble need not detain us any longer from looking at the more important issue. The question is: How does the regular and long-term practice of attention, in the context of a spiritual tradition, enable the self to extricate itself from compulsive ego-centeredness and from the blindness to subtler and more inclusive realities which result therefrom?

Most spiritual traditions contain some notion or other of the false consciousness, or false self, which when overcome, rendered transparent, or otherwise transcended, allows the self-manifesting quality of truth to disclose itself. Let us say, therefore, that the central significance of attentional exercises is to release the human being from bondage to the machinations of that false self.

To better grasp this concept, let us consider that human beings experience a persistent need to preserve and expand their being, and thus each of us, from birth, undertakes what may be called a self-project. Everyone longs to be special, to be a center of importance and value, to possess life's fullness even unto immortality, and everyone spends energy in pursuit of those things that, according to his level of understanding, will fulfill these longings. According to many contemplative traditions, such longing is grounded in a profound truth: ultimately, we share in the undying life of the ultimately real. Unfortunately, however, the ego transcendence that contemplative traditions prescribe is usually rejected in favor of endless vain attempts to expand the ego in the external world through possession, projection, and gratification.

The false self, then, can be understood as a metaphor for psychic au-

tomatism, that is, automatic, ego-centric, habit-determined patterns of thought, emotive reaction and assessment, and imaginary activity that filter and distort reality and skew behavior, according to the needs of the self-project. Having hardened into relatively permanent psychological "structures," these predispositional patterns may be conceived as constantly feeding on available psychic energy, dissolving it into the endless associational flotsam in the stream of consciousness. Energy that would otherwise be manifested as the delight of open and present-centered awareness is inexorably drawn to these structures and there disintegrates into the image-films and commentaries—the "noise"—that suffuse ordinary consciousness.

What allows the self-aggravating automatism of the false self to function unchecked is, in a word, *identification*. As long as we are unconsciously and automatically identifying with the changing contents of consciousness, we never suspect that our true nature remains hidden from us. If spiritual freedom means anything, however, it means first and foremost a freedom from such automatic identification.

Once automatism and identification are understood to be the sustainers of the false self, we are in a position to understand the psycho-transformative power of concentrated, nonreactive attention. For whether a human being is a Muslim repeating the names of God or a Theravāda Buddhist practicing bare attention, he or she is, to one degree or another, cultivating the disidentification that leads to the de-automatization<sup>5</sup> of the false self.

The mere act of trying to hold the mind to a single point, an act with which higher forms of meditation begin, teaches the beginner in a radically concrete and experiential way that he or she has little or no control over the

mental flow. All attentional training starts with this failure. This is the first great step in the work of objectifying the mental flow, that is, of seeing it not as something that "I" am doing but something that is simply happening. Without this realization no progress can be made, for one must first know one is in prison in order to work intelligently to escape. Thus, when the Christian is asked to concentrate his attention solely upon God, when the Muslim attempts to link his attention solely to the names of God, when the Tibetan Buddhist attempts with massive attention to construct elaborate images of Tārā on the screen of consciousness, the first lesson these practitioners learn is that they *cannot* do it. Ordinary mentation is freshly understood to be foreign to the deepest reality of one's being. The more regularly this is seen the clearer it becomes that one is *not* one's thoughts, and the more profoundly one understands the distinction between consciousness as such and the contents of consciousness. Objectification of the contents of consciousness and disidentification with them are natural outcomes.

Contemplative attentional exercises are strategies of starvation. Every moment that available energy is consolidated in concentrative and nonreactive attention is a moment when automatized processes cannot replenish themselves. In the dynamic world of the psyche, there is no stasis: if automatisms do not grow more strongly solidified, they begin to weaken and dissolve. When deprived of the nutrient formerly afforded to them by distracted states of mind, the automatized processes of the mind begin to disintegrate. Contemplative attention practiced over a long period of time may dissolve and uproot even the most recalcitrant pockets of psychological automatism, allowing consciousness to re-collect the ontic free-



dom and clarity that are its birthright.

*De-automatization*, then, describes an essential aspect of the process of spiritual liberation, the freeing of oneself from bondage to the false self. It names, furthermore, a gradual, long-term process of transformation, a process within which discrete mystical experiences reach fruition and without which they are destined to fade into ineffectual memories.

HOWEVER, IT SHOULD be clear that the function of contemplative work is largely destructive. The accoutrements of a spiritual tradition provide a protective and constructive framework within which this destructive work can proceed. The more seriously the foundations of the false self are undermined by the practice of attention, the fiercer become the storms of protest from within. The "dying" that occurs during contemplative work can cause internal shocks and reactions so profound that only the deep contours of a tradition can absorb them and turn them to creative effect. The support of a tradition hundreds of years old—rich in symbolism, metaphysical and psychological maps, and the accumulated experience of thousands of past wayfarers—and the guidance of an experienced teacher are indispensable. A "new age" movement that wishes to champion contemplative technique but jettison the traditional context in which it was originally lodged seems likely to be either very superficial or very dangerous or both.

Moreover, tradition stresses and a spiritual community supports, in a way that a mere technique cannot, the importance of morality as a *sine qua non* foundation and necessary ongoing accompaniment to the inner work. Without the rectification of external conduct, inner work cannot proceed far. One would be hard pressed to

find a single exception to this rule in the great traditions.

Finally, human transformation is effected not solely by isolated bouts of intense attentional training; such training must be linked to ordinary life by an intentionality that makes every aspect of life a part of the spiritual work. The contemplative opus, in other words, is hardly limited to formal periods of attentional practice. Ordinary activity and formal contemplative practice must reinforce each other and between them sustain the continuity of practice that alone can awaken the mind and help it realize the *telos* adumbrated for it in the images and concepts of the tradition to which it belongs.

Attentional exercises are hardly meant to be practiced in isolation. Their effectiveness requires not only long practice but also the support of a community, the guidance of tradition, the tranquillity effected by moral purification, and, finally, the continuity of practice that allows the power of will, indispensable to the transformative work, to be fully born. ●

## NOTES

1. "Contemplative Prayer in the Christian Tradition," in *America*, April 8, 1978, pp. 278 ff.
2. Javad Nurbakhsh, *In the Paradise of the Sufis* (New York: Khaniqahi-Nimatulahi Publications, 1979), p. 72.
3. *The Supreme Doctrine* (New York: Viking Press, 1959), p. 40.
4. 1977, pp. 15-16.
5. A concept for which we are indebted to Arthur I. Deikman in "Deautomatization and the Mystic Experience," *Psychiatry* 29 (1966): 324-338.

Abridged with the permission of Philip Novak from two of his previously written articles: "Attention" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade, Vol. I (New York: Macmillan, 1987), and "Dynamics of Attention: Core of the Contemplative Way" in *Journal of Studies in Formative Spirituality* (Vol. V, No. 1, Feb. 1984), published at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.